

# Young and Restless:

Harnessing the Economic Resilience  
of Displaced Youth in Nairobi

REPORT FOR COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTORS

September 2012

## WHO ARE WE?

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) is an advocacy organization based in New York, United States. It advocates for changes in laws, policies and programs to improve the lives and protect the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, children and young people.

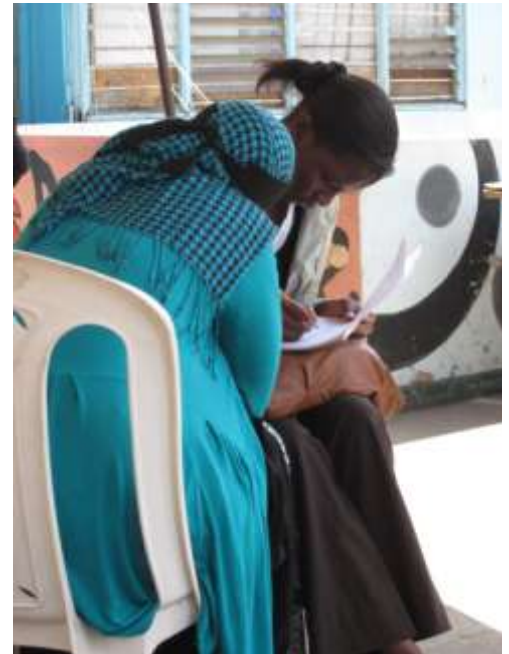
## WHY DID WE COME TO NAIROBI?

The WRC came to Nairobi to study the living situation of refugee youth. Between 52,000 and 200,000 refugees and asylum seekers are estimated to live in Kenya's urban areas. Most live in overcrowded slums, and they struggle to make a living. The WRC is researching whether refugee youth living in urban areas can get education or find jobs. We have also visited Panama and Cairo, Egypt.

## WHAT DID WE DO DURING OUR VISIT?

The WRC visited the Nairobi neighborhoods of Eastleigh, Kangemi, Kasarani, Kawangware and Waithaka. The team conducted 42 interviews with individual youth. It also conducted eight group discussions. The youth were aged 15-24; half were female and half were male. They were Somalis, Ethiopian Oromos, Eritreans, Rwandans and Burundians, as well as a few Kenyans. WRC also interviewed staff of 18 organizations that provide livelihood services for displaced youth.

Most of the young women and men WRC interviewed had been separated from their families for several years. Some had been separated due to attacks by militia and police. They had faced torture and rape. Some youths' relatives had been killed. Some had to flee suddenly and ran into security forces and bandits on their journey to Kenya. Many spent time in refugee camps in Kenya before they went to Nairobi. Many stopped attending school when they left their homeland. Most of the youth we talked to were not actively seeking services and did not know about services that were available to them. Most did not know about their rights as refugees or about the law in Kenya.



A member of the WRC's research team interviews a young woman refugee from Somalia.

## THE SEARCH FOR A BETTER EDUCATION

Most refugee youth in Nairobi do not have access to education. Many refugees and asylum seekers have moved to the city because they cannot go to school beyond primary school in the camps. But Kenyan public secondary schools have increased their annual fees to 60,000 Kenyan shillings (\$710) on average, which many young people cannot afford.

Many young women cannot go to school because they are pregnant or looking after children. Refugees can go to university if they can pay the fees and have proper school documentation. Asylum seekers can go to university only if they have a Kenyan sponsor.

## **THE NEED FOR IMPROVED SECURITY**

Refugees of all nationalities said they experienced violent crime, including robbery and sexual violence. This makes it very difficult for them to earn money in the informal economy. Somali and Ethiopian refugees living in Eastleigh said the police stopped them regularly. The police threatened to put them in detention or forced them to pay a bribe, even if they had appropriate documentation.

Some refugees make informal arrangements with their neighbors to put their money together in case they are arrested. Others pay the police a monthly protection payment to avoid harassment. Bribes make up a large portion of refugees' spending, which affects their livelihoods.

Many Somali and Ethiopian respondent females said their safety was at risk because of harmful cultural practices, clan and family stresses. Because of security threats (and cultural restrictions, in the case of Somalis and Ethiopians) it is hard for girls to move around in their communities. This means it is very difficult for them to earn a living.

## **OBSTACLES TO MAKING MONEY**

A recent survey by UNHCR found that refugees and asylum seekers in Eastleigh need 3,000-4,000 shillings (\$35-\$48) more each month to pay their basic living expenses. Because of this, they may have to turn to risky or illegal work to survive. Nearly half of the youth said they did not have a specific job. Many survive partly on money sent from abroad by friends and family. Girls and young women said they had casual and temporary work, such as domestic work, helping out in shops and in hair salons. Male interviewees have temporary jobs, delivering milk, water or packages, and help in street stalls and shops. Only a few have proper wage jobs.

Women can often get only low-earning jobs because of gender bias. They may be exploited at work or sexually harassed in the streets. This makes it hard for them to move around the city and to build social relationships and earn a living.

Even though Nairobi has many NGOs, there are not many NGO programs and services that target refugee youth. Existing programs reach only a few hundred refugee youth. As a result, refugee youth cannot develop their skills. If they find work, it is usually in the informal market, and they don't have opportunities to get better jobs and earn more money. Most refugees live in poor, high-crime neighborhoods and live in fear of police harassment and gang violence.

## **WHAT CONCLUSIONS DID WE REACH?**

It is very difficult for young refugees in Nairobi to earn an income. It is also difficult for them to attend school and training programs. Some of the reasons for this include urban violence, police harassment, restricted access to formal markets, disrupted education and a lack of safe spaces in the community.

Young people do not know much about their rights or about refugee laws and policies. They don't know about programs that exist to help them. Very few refugee youth access programs that will help them get the skills they need to find jobs.

## **WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND?**

Refugee youth in Nairobi need access to education, training and startup capital. They must be protected from violence and police abuse. Below are some of our recommendations.



Young women selling KenChic brand chicken sausages on the street in Eastleigh told the Women's Refugee Commission they were proud to finally be making their own money.

UNHCR should:

- help displaced urban youth learn about refugee policy, rights and services;
- do more to educate the Kenya National Police on refugee law and policy.

The Kenyan National Police should:

- take action to control police harassment and extortion of foreigners.

Service providers (NGOs) should:

- ask young displaced women and men for their ideas when they design programs;
- connect refugee youth to different services depending on their level of poverty. Everybody should have access to savings and micro-insurance products.
- provide youth with more access to safe spaces to spend time with peers, develop relationships with mentors, especially for girls and for groups who do not have well-developed networks.

You can read our full report and our recommendations in *Young and Restless: Harnessing the Economic Resilience of Displaced Youth in Nairobi*, at <http://wrc.ms/SZLSjZ>.

Please let us know if this report was helpful to you at [info@wrcommission.org](mailto:info@wrcommission.org).

### **Acknowledgements**

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